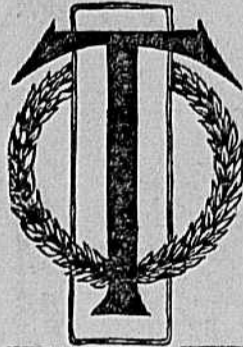


# THE BANNER SERIES OF SELECTED SHORT STORIES

## In the Valley of the Shadow

By Josephine Dodge Daskam  
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O BELDEN, pacing the library doggedly, the waiting seemed interminable, the strain unnecessarily prolonged. A half hour ago quick feet had echoed through the upper halls, windows had opened, doors all but slammed, vague whisperings and drawn breaths had hovered palpably about the whole place; but now all was utterly quiet. His own regular footfall alone disturbed the unnatural stillness of a large house.

Outside the delicious October sun poured down through an atmosphere of faultless blue. The foliage was thick yet, and the red and yellow leaves danced heartily in the wind. A year ago they had gone on a nutting party, and Clarice had raced with the children and picked up more than anybody else. Now—even to think of her brought that faint odor of salts of lavender and beef tea that disheartened him so, somehow, when he sat by her bed coaxing her into sipping the stuff.

Some one was coming down the stairs. It was Peter's step—the new one since last Friday, when they had all, it seemed, begun to walk and talk and breathe a little differently. Belden hurried across the room and caught him at the foot of the steps.

"Well, old man, how goes it?" he demanded, with a determined cheerfulness.

"His brother-in-law started at him emphatically.

"It's tomorrow," he said, gripping the newel post, "tomorrow afternoon. Jameson is coming—they'll do it here. Jameson brings his special nurse for the—operation, but the other one is due at 5, and you get her just the same. I told Henry to put up the dogcart. I don't know, though—maybe the runabout—no, the tire's loose. Still it might do."

"For heaven's sake, Peter, don't bother about it! I'll find a rig. What else does he say?"

"He says there's a good fighting chance—a very good one. He says her grit alone—Oh, Belden, what shall we do? What shall we do?"

Peter sat down heavily on the lowest stair.

"Only last week was so well—and yet she really wasn't. I suppose he knows. But it doesn't seem possible—I can't get it through my head. Poor little Caddy! She never had a sick-day in her life. No headaches, like most women; even, no nonsense—Oh, Belden, what shall we do?"

"Trace up, Peter—think what a good fighting chance means; think of that! It's not as if Caddy were old; she has that on her side. She's seven years behind me, you know."

Peter scowled. "You're 50, aren't you?"

"Not a bit. Only 48, and just that, too. Now you go out and get the nurse, and I'll stay here. I'll do you a lot of good. Don't mope around in the house all day—what's the use?"

"I can't leave the house. Honestly, Belden, I can't. I've tried twice, and I just walk right back. It's no good. There's the cart—and you won't be long, will you?"

Belden took up the reins with a vague sense of momentary relief; it was something to do. Under the influence of the fresh autumn air his spirits rose; he found himself enjoying the swift rattle of the cart and the beat of the horse's feet. After all, think of Caddy's grit; think of her fine constitution! A fighting chance—that was little enough to say, though. Why couldn't he have put it a little stronger? Hitchcock was always a pessimist.

At the station the usual crowd of well-dressed suburbanites quieted their horses and waited impatiently for the express. As Belden drew up into line, they greeted him with a subdued interest; coachmen left their seats to ask how Mrs. Moore was today, and when could one see her? A sudden mist came over his eyes as he answered briefly, "Very soon—I hope."

The train thundered in; in an incredibly short time all the guests and commuters were hurried off toward town—where was that nurse?

As his glance wandered through the thinning crowd, it was met suddenly and squarely by two brown eyes set in a fresh, pink face, framed by dark hair lightly sprinkled with gray. The second that he looked into that woman's eyes taught him her character, absolutely, as finally as if he had grown up with her. One could trust her to the last ditch, he thought.

She walked straight up to the cart. "I am the nurse sent for by Dr. Hitchcock. Are you Mr. Moore?"

"I am Mrs. Moore's brother—Mr. Belden," he explained. "Have you your checks?"

"That is all arranged," she returned briefly. "I am all ready. May I ask you to hurry? Dr. Hitchcock was anxious for me to see her before 6, when the fever begins."

His nerves were more sharply edged than he knew; an instant irritation seized him.



where they had left him. He had an idea of showing her the house, stating some of the facts of Clarice's sudden and terrible need of her, indicating that in a family so jarred from the very foundations it would be wiser to look to him than to the bewildered master of the establishment; but this was not necessary. Evidently, she persisted in dispensing with his services.

His hand slipped to his vest pocket, but he replaced the cigar uncertainly; it seemed not quite the thing to smoke. Ought he to go to Peter? In his mind's eye he saw the poor fellow haunting the landing by Caddy's door; he had an idea that in some way he kept things quiet by doing this. And how could one be sure that the troubled creature wanted company?

There was a violent rattle at the bell, a jarring of wheels on the asphalt. The door flew open, and the prettiest little woman imaginable, all fluffy ends and scarlet flowers and orris scent, rushed toward him.

"Oh, Will! Oh, Will!" she gasped, "isn't it terrible? Where is Peter? Can I see her? Oh, Will!"

Instinctively, he took her in his arms—she always did that with Peter's sister—and she put her head on his shoulder and cried a little, while he patted her and murmured, "There, there!"

She was so manifestly comforted, and it was so pleasant to comfort her—this was what a woman should be. He felt a renewed sense of capacity, of readiness for even the most terrible emergency. He led her gently to the great cushioned window seat and listened sympathetically to her excited babblings.

"It will kill Peter—it will kill him! In—in a great many ways, you know, Will. Peter isn't so—so calm as Caddy. He is just bound up with her. Suppose—Oh, Will!"

"Don't cry, Sue, dear, don't!" he said, soothingly. "She has a good chance—a fine chance, really. These things are mostly resisting power, you know, and grit, and think what a lot of grit Caddy's got!"

"Oh, I know, I know! Don't you know when the baby died—that first baby—and s—she was so weak she could hardly speak? 'Never mind, P—Peter, we'll have another! Oh, dear, she was so plucky, Will! And now to think—"

He choked a little. "I know, I know," he murmured; "Caddy's a brick. She always was."

She sat up, not wholly withdrawing from his arm, and patted her eyes, breathing brokenly. Little gusts of orris floated toward him.

"Where are the children?" she asked, almost herself now.

"They're here—Peter wants them one minute and sends them away the next. I should send them to grandmother's, but he won't hear of it."

A light step sounded on the stair. The nurse appeared on the lower landing. She was dressed in cool blue gingham; the straps of her white apron marked the firm, broad lines of her bust and shoulder.

"Is this Mrs. Wylie?" she said in her clear, assured voice. "Mrs. Moore would like to see her a moment. Will you come with me?"

"I will come directly," and Sue gathered together her gloves and handbag.

"She's very good-looking—it's a pity her hair is so gray," she breathed in his ear. As the two women stood together a moment on the landing, he realized, not for the first time, that Sue was a little too small. But he had never thought her shallow before.

Peter came in by the greenhouse door, walking slowly, his hands behind his back. He looked odd for the first time in his jolly, persistently boyish life.

"These chrysanthemums are all drying up," he complained, fretfully; "not one of the blamed servants has done a thing since—since—O Lord, Will, what shall we be doing this time tomorrow? Where are the children? Where's Miss Strong? There's a woman for you! Caddy took to her directly. She's there now. She's talking to her about the children. Oh, my God!"

Belden grasped his hand, and they walked silently up and down the hall.

"Well, Little Woman, How Goes It?"

derneath are the everlasting arms! Do you feel that, Peter?"

"I—I—yes, indeed, Aunt Lucia—you must want a bite of something, I'm sure, driving so far."

Peter writhed miserably in Aunt Lucia's crape-and-jet arms.

"Not till I have seen her, Peter. Afterward I shouldn't mind. I have brought such a beautiful address by Bishop Hunter. It was delivered on the occasion of the death of Governor—, unless I forgot to put it in with my knitted shawl. I believe I did. I will send for it directly. When my dear husband—he was so fond of Clarice—died, I read it more than anything else, except the prayer book, of course. You will surely find it a help."

"Yes, Aunt Lucia. Your room is ready, and—"

"Not till I have seen her, Peter."

"Sue is there now, and Miss Strong says nobody else this evening. Tomorrow—"

Aunt Lucia drew away.

"Do I understand that Susy Wylie—no relation at all—is preferred before the only mother Clarice has had for all these years?"

Peter winced. "But you weren't here, Aunt Lucia," he argued wearily.

"Who is Miss Strong?"

"Here she is!" There was great relief in Peter's voice. "Miss Strong, my aunt, Mrs. Wetherly."

"Mrs. Moore sends you her best love, and wants you to get thoroughly rested, so that you can see her the first thing in the morning. Mrs. Wetherly. She says you are not to let them frighten you."

As if by magic, the formidable frown faded from Aunt Lucia's forehead. She smiled approvingly at the nurse.

"Very well. I should like to ask you a few questions—Clarice was always thoughtful."

They moved away together. The two men stared at each other.

"How do you account for that?" Belden queried.

"Oh, it's her calm way and her voice. You want to do everything she says. Norah says she's sure Mrs. Moore will get well now, with her to take care of her. By George, Will, if she pulls Caddy through, it'll be worth her while, I tell you."

like a fool," he half-whispered. "I can't get used to this damned see-saw. First, I'm all ready for it, and then I'm nearly wild. And so it goes—up and down, up and down."

"How is she? Is it all settled for tomorrow? Hitchcock said that perhaps—"

"Mrs. Moore is doing very well—really very well. She was a little excited when Mrs. Wylie was with her, but she is nicely sleepy now. I think it will be better to stay only a moment. She will get a good night's rest tonight. It is so cool. The weather is on our side."

She smiled into his eyes and nodded gravely. He brightened and squared his shoulders. As he went quickly up the stairs, Belden stopped the woman.

"Tell me," he said, authoritatively, "how is my sister, really? What do you consider her chance?"

She looked him easily in the eyes. "It is impossible to say," she returned gravely. "Your sister is a very brave, self-possessed woman, and seems to have a good constitution. That is, of course, half the battle. But her case is very complicated, and, until the operation, no one can tell. You may have every confidence in Dr. Jameson. He is a magnificent surgeon. Before her non-committal eyes his own fell baffled. He was more irritated than he cared to own. Could she not see that he was prepared for anything, that his self-control was as great as her own? She treated him like a child; these professional reserves, necessary, doubtless, in the case of Peter and his excitable sister, were wasted on him. Why could she not see it?"

"I am quite aware of Dr. Jameson's skill," he said coldly. "but I had hoped that you would find yourself able to break through the professional attitude sufficiently to give me your real opinion, which, of course, you must have formed."

She threw him a quick glance. "Ah, my friend," he thought, exultingly, "you have a temper, then!" But in an instant it was gone.

"I have told you all I was able to tell," she said evenly. "I have been here but a short time, you know."

She turned and left the hall, and he, chafing under a sense of merited rebuke, conscious of a foolish poutance, went discontentedly into the library. He seemed to be continually at fault with Miss Strong, but unable to resist the effort to master her.

The evening was very lonely and still. Peter had gone to his room early, and the children had effaced themselves; Susy was with them. Aunt Lucia read the "Imitation of Christ" by the fire. Belden's mind turned unconsciously to the old days when Caddy and he dreamed out their future in the nursery. It had all come out just as she had planned, except this. Poor little Caddy—a fighting chance!

The next morning seemed to fly by them; it was 9 o'clock, 10, 11.

At this hour a feverish activity suddenly spread through the house. They met and passed each other, hurrying, troubled, secretive; the servants stumbled and quarreled in their purposeless haste. To Belden, quieting when he could, sternly optimistic everywhere; at heart heavy and uncertain, it seemed that the one anchor of their hopes was this calm, clear-eyed woman in her uniform of authority.

Peter hung pathetically on her lightest word; the children, dazed and terrified, ate and exercised at her command; his own boy, a strange hard look in his furtive eyes, followed her like a dog; and Aunt Lucia submitted with unprecedented meekness to an abrupt curtailment of her interview with Clarice. He himself went into the bedroom for a moment, half uncertain of the reality of the experience. It was absurd to remember that he might never see her, conscious, again—his own little Caddy.

He sat awkwardly on the side of the bed.

"Well, little woman, how goes it?"

"Queen's taste, Will!"

"Good for you. I'm proud of the Beldens, Caddy—Billy acts like a drum major."

Her eyes softened.

"The dear boy," she murmured. Their eyes met. "Look after him," he said, and his "As long as I live!" He stooped and kissed her lightly. "Mind you look as well as this tomorrow!"

invaluable person—is kindly assisting me. Did I say three? Yes, of course. Thank you. We are playing for beans only, you see."

Belden watched them curiously. She sat as imperceptibly as Caddy's bedside, her eyes fixed thoughtfully on her cards.

"And raise you three," she said.

"Five more—you will excuse me, Belden, but your aunt, Mrs. Wetherly, is a somewhat unusually irritating woman. I'll see you, Miss Strong—ah, yes, two pair, queens up."

"What has she done?"

"She insists that Mrs. Moore shall not only see Mr. Burchard, to which I have not the least objection, but that she shall hold a communion service, directly, there. Now, if your sister had asked for this herself, it would be another matter; but, unless this is the case, I always regard it as a depressing agent. It is a strain, in any case."

"I think Mrs. Moore will go through with it very easily, Doctor," Miss Strong interposed, slipping the cards into their leather envelope and gathering up the beans. "She will be fresh from her nap, and it will be very short. She has promised Mrs. Wetherly, you know, and it would distress her more to break it—"

"All right, all right. Have it your way. Much obliged."

He took the cards from her and went out.

"My aunt is very trying," Belden began.

"Oh, many people feel so about it," she assured him, "especially high-church people. She only did what she thought right."

He drew a breath of relief.

"You'll see she's not too tired?" he asked, and as he went to luncheon he wondered at the comfort he derived from her mute nod.

He was roused from the table, where the dishes left by them were untouched for the most part, by a disturbance in the hall.

"It's the priest," the waitress murmured, and with a frown he checked her rising tears.

Aunt Lucia bustled through the room.

"You must come, Wilmot," she whispered eagerly, "she asked for you. Peter is locked into his room, and neither of the children has been confirmed. Susy, of course, is a Presbyterian. Not that dear Mr. Burchard would object—he is so broad. But you have no excuse. Oh, it is beautiful, Wilmot! She looks so lovely!"

He followed her wearily. What did it matter? It seemed to him ominous, terrible—but it would please Caddy. She sat propped up in the bed. Her cheeks were crimson, her eyes bright. White chrysanthemums stood in silver vases, candles burned softly on the white-draped dresser. Mr. Burchard, in the hall just beyond, was slipping his surplice over his head. A faint odor of wine mingled with the flowers.

Belden dared not look at her. She was to him, in that moment, mystic, holy, a thing apart. He dropped on his knees beside a silver-white apron, his eyes on the floor, his heart beating hard.

The solemn words grew in intensity, the candles flickered audibly in the secret hush. The clergyman moved toward the bed, and they heard Caddy's breath draw out in a deep, shuddering sob; her teeth chattered against the cup.

Belden set his jaw; it was cruel, brutal. They were killing her. His clenched fist moved blindly toward his neighbor; he touched her hand and gripped it fiercely.

In front of him on the wall hung a large photograph of Billy's baseball nine in full uniform. He could have drawn it from memory, afterward. Billy, he remembered, was a great catcher. He held hard to that cool, firm hand.

—be amongst you and remain with you always. Amen." There was a little stir. The hand was drawn from his.

"Come, now," whispered Aunt Lucia, and he walked, stumbling and stiff from kneeling, from the room. At the door he glanced a second backward, but only Dr. Hitchcock was to be seen, bending over the bed. Miss Strong had already taken away candles and flowers, and Caddy's triple mirror was back on the dresser.

Mr. Burchard, in his long, black cassock, offered his hand cordially.

"I am glad you could be with us, Mr. Belden," he began, but the other broke in:

"If you have tired her, if this makes a difference—"

He muttered fiercely, "you will have me to settle with. Mind that!"

He hurried down the stairs, his hands still clenched. Peter was starting off with the road wagon. They nodded shortly at each other.

From then, the time raced on incredibly. The great surgeon, with his two assistants, was in the hall; he was on the stairs; he was lost to sight. There was a momentary rush and bustle, and closing of a door. Peter came out, whispering to himself, and disappeared somewhere. The others, clustered in the library, spoke fitfully.

"They carried her on a cot into the west room," somebody murmured close to Belden. It was little Margaret.

"I saw her. She waved her hand at me! I threw her a kiss. Miss Strong smiled at me—I love Miss Strong."

Aunt Lucia sobbed. Susy bit her lip and played with Billy's unwilling hand.

"Where's my father? Where's he gone?" he demanded. "Who's that other woman with the apron?"

Miss Strong appeared at the door. "She has taken the ether very well indeed; they are much pleased," she said softly. They hung on her words; they overwhelmed her with questions. She soothed them like children.

It grew suddenly clear to Belden that Caddy would die. It must be so. He wondered that he had hoped for anything else. He was sorry for them all. He watched indifferently while Miss Strong led the children away—no know she was taking them to their father. Later, while Aunt Lucia, on her knees, read through streaming eyes from her prayer book, and Susy talked nervously to him, he watched the firm, full figure of the woman pacing up and down the piazza outside, her arm drawn through his restless boy's.

"God bless her!" he said aloud.

Afterward, he could never recall the consecutive happenings to the end. He saw only separate pictures.

In one, a strange young man opened the door and said the words that frightened them with delight.

In another, a drawn, old, white-faced man—surely not Dr. Jameson—leaned weakly in a chair, while a woman handed him a tiny glass of colored liquid.

In yet another, a father hid his face in his little daughter's bosom and sobbed, with shaking shoulders; his tall son smiled bravely over the bent head.

In the last picture he himself bore a part; for when he came upon his shy, suspicious boy clasped in the kind arms of the woman whose brown eyes, once seen, had haunted his thoughts ever since, he gathered them both to him irresistibly. As he laid his cheek against hers, he felt that it was wet with tears.

"It lies with you now," he whispered in her ear, "to give her back to us, well and strong. He says you can. Afterward—"

He drew away from him.

"I—I—must go. I am so glad—I will do my best," she answered unsteadily.

He caught her hand. "And afterward?" he repeated, a growing mastery in his voice. She tried to meet his eyes, but her own fell, convulsed.